Living Pulpit Conference
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ESSENTIALS OF PREACHING

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I learned my most important lesson about preaching on that auspicious and terrifying day when I was invited to preach from the pulpit of the church in which I had grown up, the Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

It was July, 1963. I had graduated from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, had received ordination and had been duly installed as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Dyer, Indiana, twenty-five miles southeast of here. But now I was returning to my home with my wife, two baby daughters, a new summer suit, a new 1963 maroon Chevrolet Bel-Air, which I had purchased on the basis of my first ever full-time professional salary. I was feeling good. I was, you might say, full of myself.

My father, who taught me the most important thing I ever learned about preaching, was beside himself. An engineer on the Pennsylvania Railroad, a high school graduate, he and mother were well-read, literate. The Sunday *New York Times* was part of the Sabbath ritual in my home. We were steady Presbyterians. Not exactly luke warm, but reticent. We were in the pew every Sunday morning, but that was about it. Dad was proud on that hot July Sunday. The whole family was there; aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. So was the congregation: Miss Bair, a school teacher, whose size and demeanor had always inspired awe and terror in me, and who once in a 7th grade class had said to me — "Please be quiet! You talk too much and too fast." After the service she shook my hand and winked. Miss Bair winked! and said, "You still talk too much and too fast, but you're improving." And John Beatty was there, who with infinite patience had endured our adolescent foolishness and yet continued to be a teacher and basketball coach and friend.

Dad threatened to sell popcorn, programs, and autographed family pictures outside on the sidewalk before the service.

It was quite an occasion and the question was surely — what to preach that will measure up to the expansive dimensions of the occasion? I chose Matthew 16:13-20: Jesus' question to his disciples:

"Who do you say that I am?" and Peter's answer: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

How could I go wrong with that? Besides it was the passage on which I had written my senior paper, my thesis. I knew that passage cold. I had read it and exegeted it in Greek. I had done word studies. I knew what "Messiah/Anointed One/Christ" meant in antiquity. I knew what the Fathers had written about the passage, and the Reformers and everybody of notice in this century. My paper was bristling with footnotes.

And so I turned it into a sermon. It was a tour de force. Never has such scholarship, such erudition, and elegance been present in the pulpit of the Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Fortunately grace, patience and forgiveness were still practiced as Presbyterian virtues in those days. The congregation seemed pleased. My family seemed proud. So did my parents. After the large lunch they had for all the relatives, we helped do dishes, and then Dad and I sat down in the living room. He told me how proud he was and how much it had meant for me to preach in our church. He told me he liked my sermon. And then he taught the most important lesson — He said:

> "You know, you told us what everybody else thought about that passage — about Jesus' question and Peter's answer, but you never told us what you thought. If you ever preach on that passage again, save some time at the end for what you think."
>
> "Save some time at the end for what you think."

It is the essential of preaching.

When I began to put my mind to this assignment — to talk twenty or thirty minutes about the "essentials of preaching," to be followed by David Read, Walter Burghardt, with responses by Don Wardlaw, Richard Fragomeni, Carol Noren, I confess that I seriously considered simply advising all of us to listen up, pay attention. These people really know how to do it. They're the ones I read — *Sir, We Would Like to See Jesus: Homilies from a Hilltop* by Walter Burghardt. My copy is dog eared. Every advent I look up and read,

> "Advent is not simply a season, the whole of life is an advent. We are waiting expectantly for something that in a sense is already here." [p. 33]

Thinking and writing with that precision, cleanness and simplicity is essential.

And David Read — he's got real shelf space in my library! I've got seven of them and they're all well used. In a 1978 volume, *Unfinished Easter,* Read is, by my calculations, about a full decade ahead of the rest of us in a sermon he called "The Motherhood of God."

> "In God Almighty are all the qualities that we recognize in humanity at its best, as male and female. Hence God may surely be thought of not only as the 'Great Father of Glory' as the hymn says, but also as the Creative Mother from whom all creation comes." [1978; p. 114-115]

Anybody writes anything about preaching — I read it. I'm selective about whose sermons I read, but if a reputable preacher, or a teacher writes, I read, or better yet, listen. It's how I learn. Someone gave me a tape of Bill Hybels', Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, speaking for a Ministers' Conference. I listened to it on my car tape player, an unusual thing for me to do. Willow Creek is the place we all like to criticize because nothing that successful could possibly be authentic and no speaker that popular could have integrity. Well, let me tell you, Bill Hybels on ministry is very good, speaks the truth with power, eloquence and humanness. I wrote him a fan letter when I got home.

The truth is I never learned how to preach in any formal sense. I attended a University Divinity School which sometimes seemed to treat those of us who planned to become pastors of churches as people with a learning disability or else an emotional problem. That's not fair — I think I learned to preach by their not trying to teach me, and I think now that some of them knew exactly what they were doing.

The entire homiletical preparation consisted of one portion of one class designed for those of us who persisted in our intent to go to work for what we learned to call "institutional religion." And that involved preaching one sermon to the class and then being subjected to the critique of a Lutheran Professor of Theology, Joseph Sittler. That, of course, was worth the price of tuition. Sittler could say more, and say it more beautifully and economically than anyone. And if you attended Bond Chapel at eleven thirty o'clock on Wednesdays you could hear him preach, and Nathan Scott, and James Nichols and Marcus Barth and J. Coert Ryllarsdam, intellectual giants, in black robes, holding the wings of the eagle — pulpit in Bond Chapel, like the handlebars of a motorcycle — and preaching.

What forced the issue for me was taking a student church in my second year for purely economic reasons — they offered a house and fifty dollars per week. I hadn't a clue about how to preach a sermon. But the white knuckle intensity of having to do it every seven days forced the learning curve on me. And so I read and read and read — and I did something else, unconsciously, which I am prepared to say is another essential. I apprenticed myself to other preachers. I learned how by listening, watching, reading, imitating. I'm still doing that, I realize, still learning to preach by apprenticing myself to those who do it best.

Which brings me to this event. *The Living Pulpit* is an important idea. It is a gathering quarterly, in print, of those of us who care about preaching, who believe it is somehow near the heart of the life of the church. That it has enormous potential for transformation, and who believe we can and must always be learning how to do it. *The Living Pulpit* is a conversation between that critical community of preachers and scholars of preaching. It is a way to continue to learn from one another.

I need to circle back and pick up a stray thought. I inferred that I learned how to preach by the faculty of the Divinity School not trying to teach me. It occurs to me that may not be a politic thing to say in the presence of people who earn their living trying to do just that and one of whom, at least, Don Wardlaw, has been gracious enough in the past to see to it that his school actually paid me money to teach courses on preaching. Of course, I was only facetious. Wardlaw is good. He knows how to do it and how to teach others to do it. I missed a lot — I'm not certain at the time — because nobody was teaching preaching much then; you know — "monologic, hierarchical communication is dead meat: worship is where the action is. . . if you have to preach, have a dialogue with a few people in the pews. . ." I do wish I had heard Wardlaw et al and been put through the rigors of intentional teaching and learning about preaching.

It is treacherous business, is it not? In the book I just read, and it is a good one, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

> "Watching a preacher climb into the pulpit is a lot like watching a tight rope walker climb out onto the platform as the drum roll begins . . . it is skill but also grace — a benevolent God's decision to let these daredevils tread the high places where ordinary mortals have the good sense not to go." (p. 76)

Brown says we have to have sermons because —

> "The word of God calls for a response with some human daring in it." A sermon, she says "is an act of creation with real risk in it, as one foolhardy human being presumes to address both God and humankind, speaking to each on the other's behalf, and praying to get out of the pulpit alive." (p. 69)

It is treacherous business, is it not? "Who would live like this?" I find myself asking more and more — the more I do it. My best friend is an orthopedic surgeon about my age. We were sitting at a ball game and his beeper went off. He found a pay phone and returned to his seat in five minutes. "Everything okay?" I asked. "Sure" he said. "A hip, I'll do it tomorrow."

He already had one total hip replacement scheduled for morning. Now he had two. He'll stride in at seven o'clock a.m., look at the x-rays, walk into an operating room and replace a person's hip. A few hours later he'll do it again. He's done it thousands of times. He's good. His patients are almost always grateful and he was going to make more money in the morning than I make in a month.

At that moment I hated him, not only because he's got enough money to seriously contemplate retiring and playing golf — which interests me not at all — but because we've both been doing our profession for almost the same number of years and he has mastered his. Knows exactly how to do it. And I can't sleep on Saturday night, and in fact I'm aware that I'm still learning, still trying to figure out how to do it better. Sometimes how to do it all. You know, I assume, the frantic feeling that comes sometimes on Saturday night — or Friday or Thursday — or whenever you do your preparing and writing. "Good Lord — they're all coming back on Sunday morning; they're expecting that I'll have something for them and all I have is this. Why didn't I take the job with IBM thirty years ago, or go to law school?" Or, we think something like — "All those liturgical renewal folks in the 60s were right! . . . The sermon isn't the point. Worship is. The liturgy is what really matters. They'll be able to worship God in spite of this pitiful project I've produced — won't they?

And then something happens. Something happens that I can't begin to explain. Something that has very little to do with me. Although I am now changing my mind about that. My involvement is necessary; my hard work, my hours of study, exegesis, reading, writing and rewriting, my hours of thinking, fretting, reducing, refining — in my mind as I'm doing the thousand and one other duties of my profession. All of it is the necessary creative energy which I offer to God each week and which God, with some consistency, accepts and somehow uses, so that my own dissatisfaction with my work is almost a guarantee that someone is going to be touched and maybe even transformed by it. You'd almost believe that there is a Spirit at work in this process called Holy, one of whose chief characteristics is a transcendence, a freedom from human strictures and structures — like my anxiety, my intelligence, my ability. You'd almost believe that God Almighty came up with the process to get a little bit of the Word to the people!

THE ESSENTIALS

Preaching is a five point intersection. We have them in Chicago. Two streets at a ninety degree angle are intersected by another, angled street which cuts diagonally through the city at forty-five degrees. They are treacherous — critical: five essentials intersect.

Scripture — It's what the job is about: not delivering learned essays on this and that; but the exposition of scripture. I think it is Tom Long at Princeton who said that that's what they pay us to do; go to the Bible for them to read and think and wrestle with scripture on their behalf and then to come back with a weekly report. "I went for you and worked all week and this is what I found."

The best thing that happened to us in this regard is "narrative preaching" — which is a fancy way of giving you permission to tell Bible stories on Sunday morning. Biblical illiteracy has many sources, but surely one of them is that for a generation or so preachers didn't tell the story.

One of my teachers, Marcus Barth, didn't think much of commentaries, although he wrote a few himself. Barth said:

> "Read — read — read in Greek or Hebrew if you can, and if you can't, in English. Look up every word of it — in the English dictionary."

Make sure you hear it. Read it out loud — over and over — hear what it sounds like to your ear and mouth.

> "Wait on the text," Barbara Brown Taylor says, "until you can hear it addressing you by your own name."

And then listen to the scholars. That's not easy. Did you preach on John 10 last Sunday? I went to Gerald Sloyan's fine commentary in *The Interpretation Series*, and of course Raymond E. Brown who most of us are convinced by now, was present as the Fourth Gospel was written. It made for a long and hard week. I thought I knew what the Good Shepherd was all about. The question became whether or not what I meant was what the Fourth Gospel means. Sloyan was particularly demanding: for pages all he did was warn me to be careful. One of his least helpful warnings was:

> "Wariness is the homilist's wisest posture," and "The homilist is not permitted a single shallow move regarding the contents of John 10" [p. 138-139]

The lectionary is essential for me. Even when I don't use it I begin the process of planning to preach by reading the lectionary passages, week at a time, from a period of six months. I begin by previewing where the lections — which means the ecumenical church — want to take me. And weekly, even when I decide not to go along, I acknowledge and nod in the direction and consciously understand, where I am not going this week.

The second street that converges on the intersection is the **tradition.** People have been in this place before. The church has been to this intersection and wrestled with the passage. One of the most helpful insights I've ever received was from Fred Craddock who reminds his readers that the congregation has heard other sermons on your text for the morning. Yours is probably not the first and so they come with a history and a tradition; and after you are gone your sermon will become part of the congregation's tradition around the text.

The third presence in the intersection is the **world.** This world on this day. An election in South Africa, the hint of peaceful progress in Israel, the unspeakable horror of Rwanda, and Gorazde and Haiti and Cabrini Green. Whether or not you choose to bring the world into your sermon it is there because it is the world those people have been thinking about and reading about before they arrive in the pew. And while they may tell us on occasion that the very reason they came is to get away from all of that, you and I may understand that and respect it, but we must never be seduced by it, or else the word we speak will not be the word of God which incarnates itself in the most worldly ways.

Douglas John Hall suggests that preaching has always been, at least in part, a conversation with the world; and it has from the beginning. Part of what the preacher is about is knowing what the issues are, the questions being asked, which define a culture in a given time and place.

The preacher, I believe, must be a student of culture: must read and listen and see and participate in the world in which the congregation lives.

How to do that? How to make certain that preaching is "relevant," to use that tired 70s word; to know the questions and issues, we have to live in the world. I think we have to read more than anybody else: newspapers, local and national, news magazines, journals. I think we need to know what is being written by novelists, poets, journalists, essayists. Kathleen Norris in her wonderful bestseller *Dakota* says that Lemmon, South Dakota is so small that the poets and preachers have to hang out together. We should always be listening to what artists, musicians, writers are saying about us and our world.

"Should I preach about controversial issues?" There's a sense in which you're already in trouble if you have to ask. Since when was it ever faithful, or appropriate, to be controversial for the sake of controversy, or to avoid controversy for the sake of comfort or security? In his new book, *A Passion for the Possible,* Bill Coffin says that the people in the pews are "prepared for painful truth and tough questions." Of course, everybody knows by now that if you don't want a little pain and toughness you probably ought not to hear Bill Coffin. It is, in fact, a little different for most of us.

I have found, over and over, that when the preacher starts where we are called to start, and invests time and energy in exegeting and interpreting the Word: when the preacher makes common cause with people and instead of scolding puts the mantle of responsibility on everyone — including himself/herself: when the preacher confesses discomfort at the practical implications of the Word along with the people — those people will listen with respect, if not agreement, and perhaps even allow themselves to be challenged by the Word and called to account by the Word — not the preacher — and therefore transformed. It is what we are about, after all: not proving how brave and strong and fearless we are, but somehow becoming an instrument of God's transforming word.

And into the intersection come the **people** of the congregation. Seems basic, but I've preached a lot of sermons to people who weren't in the pews. I think it was Ernie Campbell who said that as a young preacher he often addressed the Attorney General of the United States and the Secretary of State, but not once had they been in the pews to hear his helpful word.

When I'm asked to teach preaching I take along 3 x 5 cards and I ask students to memorize what I have typed on them — two sentences by Fred Craddock:

> "The listeners speak to the preacher before the preacher speaks to them: the minister listens before saying anything. Otherwise the sermon is without a point of contact, whatever may be the general truth of its content."

Every Sunday you and I speak to someone whose heart is breaking with grief because a dear one has died, or is dying; and someone who is struggling with some addiction, afraid to admit the truth and afraid not to; and someone who is confused morally or lost relationally; someone who is struggling with the sudden loss of meaning and sense of self because the company just down-sized and at the age of fifty their structure of identity and source of personal worth just disappeared. And every Sunday there are young people full of life and hope, and men and women who have just loved intimately, and ordinary adults who are strong and true.

The question I try to ask myself about every sermon — ruthlessly — is a simple one. "So what? Does it matter? Is it worth their getting out of bed, forgoing a morning in bed with coffee and *The New York Times,* getting all dressed up — to hear me speak about God and life and hope for twenty minutes or so?" I don't always answer my questions affirmatively. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't and the Holy Spirit keeps using sermons I think are terrible frequently enough so that I never give up on one; but asking the questions is, itself, a helpful discipline.

And so, finally, into the intersection comes the preacher: bringing his or her work on the text, and the resources discovered, the written or outlined product and his or her experience and faith and life.

Someone told me once that we ought to be able to preach without ever using a personal pronoun. We can't do that of course. Oh, we can avoid saying "I" and we can and should avoid self-serving references to ourselves and our personal experiences. It is a very fine line and to every personal reference we must apply rigid standards:

- does it exploit anyone?
- does it serve the sermon or me?
- does it point to Jesus Christ or to the preacher?

But we cannot preach apart from our personal experience, our faith, our struggle. What would be the point?

And so every word we say is first of all a word to ourselves. The word we proclaim to others is God's word to us. The grace we offer to others is for us. The bread we break is for our hunger and the wine we pour is for our thirst.

> "At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography," Fred Buechner wrote.

And Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal something which I copied into mine and which I read to myself regularly.

> "All a man has to do in life that is important is sing of his love."

And Kathleen Norris, a poet living in South Dakota, because the little church was vacant, invited to be the supply preacher . . .

> "Preaching sermons was a new and unnerving experience for me . . . what I had to do was disclose myself in ways different from those I was used to doing . . . hiding behind the comfortable mask of fiction. The 'I' in a poem is never me — how could it be? But the 'I' in the sermons came close to home, and that was risky." [*Dakota: A Spiritual Geography,* p. 171]

"How are they to hear without a preacher?" St. Paul asked, rhetorically.

Or, as Dad said, on a hot Sunday afternoon in July of 1963,

> "Save some time at the end for what you think."

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Robert B. Birge, Publisher

JBIC
call JY
4/29/94
Keep this address
do this soon?
I'll need to edit it.

DEAR JOHN,

YOUR TALK AT OUR SEMINAR AT THE CHICAGO TEMPLE LAST WEDNESDAY WAS SUPERB. DAVID, WALTER AND I WANT TO THANK YOU — AS, I AM SURE, DO ALL THOSE WHO ATTENDED.

ENCLOSED CHECK IS SMALL RECOMPENSE. DO YOU THINK YOU COULD MAKE A WRITTEN COPY OF YOUR REMARKS AVAILABLE TO BILL LOVELL SO THAT IT MIGHT BE COPIED AND SENT TO THOSE WHO WERE UNABLE TO ATTEND? I WOULD LIKE YOUR TALK MADE AVAILABLE TO OTHERS, TOO.

IT WAS GOOD TO SEE YOU AND I HOPE WE HAVE STARTED SOMETHING THAT WILL BE CONTINUED IN CHICAGO + OTHER CITIES AS WELL.

CORDIALLY, Bob